

THE BILLESDON AWARD



1484





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*At the front and back of this book
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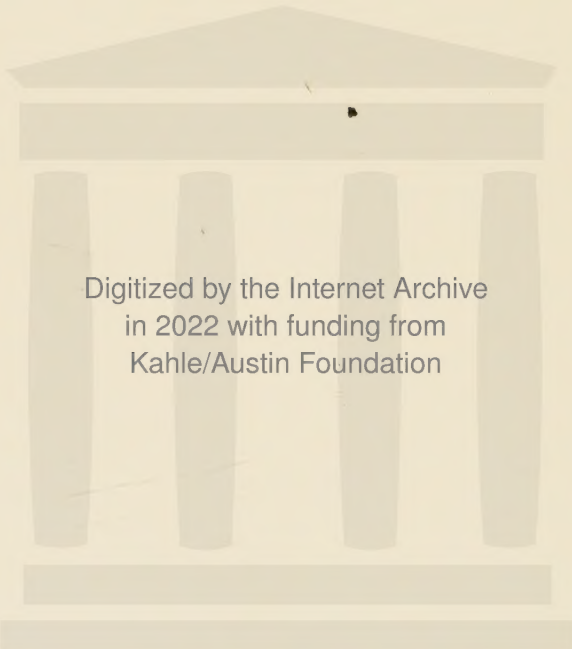
Mayor Billesdon's Award between the Skinners'
and Merchant Taylors' Companies 1484, 10 April; 1 Richard III
(Courtesy of the Corporation of London Records Office)

THE BILLESDON AWARD

by

JENNIFER LANG

This book has been published by the
Skinners' and Merchant Taylors' Companies to commemorate the
Quincentenary of the Award by Mayor Billesdon in 1484
and has been designed by Andrew Younger & Associates
and printed by Westerham Press.



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THE BILLESDON AWARD

“This day on the 10th April, 1484, the Master and Wardens of the Misteries of Skinners and Tailors with several worthy men of each Mistery undertook that they would abide by the judgement of Robert Billesdon Mayor and Aldermen of the City of London concerning a certain matter of dispute between them pending, and the said Mayor and Aldermen gave judgement for the purpose of settling the aforesaid matter”.

The dispute was over the question of precedence – as essential to the feudal system as a closed shop is to union power. Medieval society was nicely arranged so that every man, from the King to the humblest bonded serf, should keep his place. At meal times there were those who sat above the salt, and those of less exalted station who sat below. In dress the lines of demarcation were equally strict. Lords and above were supposed to wear sables; ermine and cloth of gold were reserved for knights and others who had lands worth over 400 marks a year; apprentices were punished for wearing their cloaks too short ‘like gallants’; and any unfortunate with less than 40s. a year was forbidden to wear any fur but black or white lamb.

In the Middle Ages there was no Race Relations Board or Equal Opportunities Commission to enforce social engineering, so many of these rules and regulations went by default. When rank could be so easily identified by a fur trimming or a silk gown, ambitious men and women were inclined to take sartorial liberties. So much so that Bishop Brunton complained that he could not tell the difference 'between a countess and the wife of a citizen'. To keep one's place in society it was necessary to keep one's place at table, in church, in processions, at work and at play. Precedence prevailed.

In the 13th and 14th centuries the Guilds, like the citizen's wife, were coming up in the world. As London's trade and industry expanded with the increase in population, so too did the City's organised labour. Groups of craftsmen formed themselves into Guilds, with a Royal Charter and monopolies in their trade. Craftsmen, like the Skinners, who had at first been content to work on raw materials provided by their customers, were beginning to feel their way as capitalists. In order to trade in the City of London you had to be a Freeman, so by the 14th century it became the custom to take up citizenship through one of the formally organised trades. But the Custom of London allowed a Freeman to trade in commodities other than those of their own particular Guild. A Guild had special privileges in the trade it represented, making it profitable for members to concentrate on that particular line. The Mercers had a virtual monopoly in fine textiles, the Grocers in spices; the Fishmongers financed both the fishing industry and the salting of the fish, which gave them a monopoly over the

staple diet of the poor, and brought unpopularity with power. But if there were also profit to be made elsewhere no merchant was slow to find it. One can find instances of a Surgeon trading in wool, a Weaver selling six hundred quarters of wheat to a Draper, a Barber buying a quantity of fur from a Skinner, or a Wool Merchant in the Skinners Company operating bellfoundries.

Wool, cloth, fish, wine, spices and precious metals were the raw materials which furnished most of the essentials of life, and the crafts who dealt in these things very quickly became dealers rather than simple craftsmen. The Mercers, Grocers, Drapers, Fishmongers, Goldsmiths, Skinners, Tailors and Vintners were all capitalists, buying and selling the stock materials of their craft by the fourteenth century. In the next century the Ironmongers, Salters and Haberdashers were added to the list. It is these Companies who make up eleven of the Great Twelve today. Although they were not known as the Great Twelve in medieval times, the wealth and political influence that they came to exercise caused them to be known as the Great Companies, or the Merchant Companies, because practically all the citizen merchants were enrolled in their ranks.

At that time there was no official Order of Precedence. Lists of the Companies made for various purposes record them in slightly varying sequence. For example in 1463 for a royal entry:

“For the coming of the King from the north parts to the city, the mayor and aldermen shall meet him on horseback in

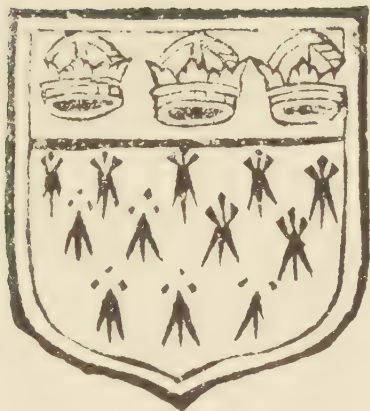
scarlet and that the commoners shall also meet the King on horseback dressed in blue gowns with black bonnets and lirapipes and that from all the under written companies certain persons shall ride just as determined below, that is to say:

Mercers 24	Vintners 12	Salters 8
Drapers 24	Skinner's 11	Haberdashers 12
Grocers 24	Tailors 24	Girdlers 6
Fishmongers 20	Ironmongers 10	Leathersellers 8
Goldsmiths 20		

And again on September 17th, 1469, for the muster of the watch:

"Be it remembered that the Master and Wardens of the Mystery of Iron and were charging to the Guildhall before the Mayor and Aldermen on the Monday next on the 17th day of September on which day men to be made more than double in number. The men armed in the best manner:

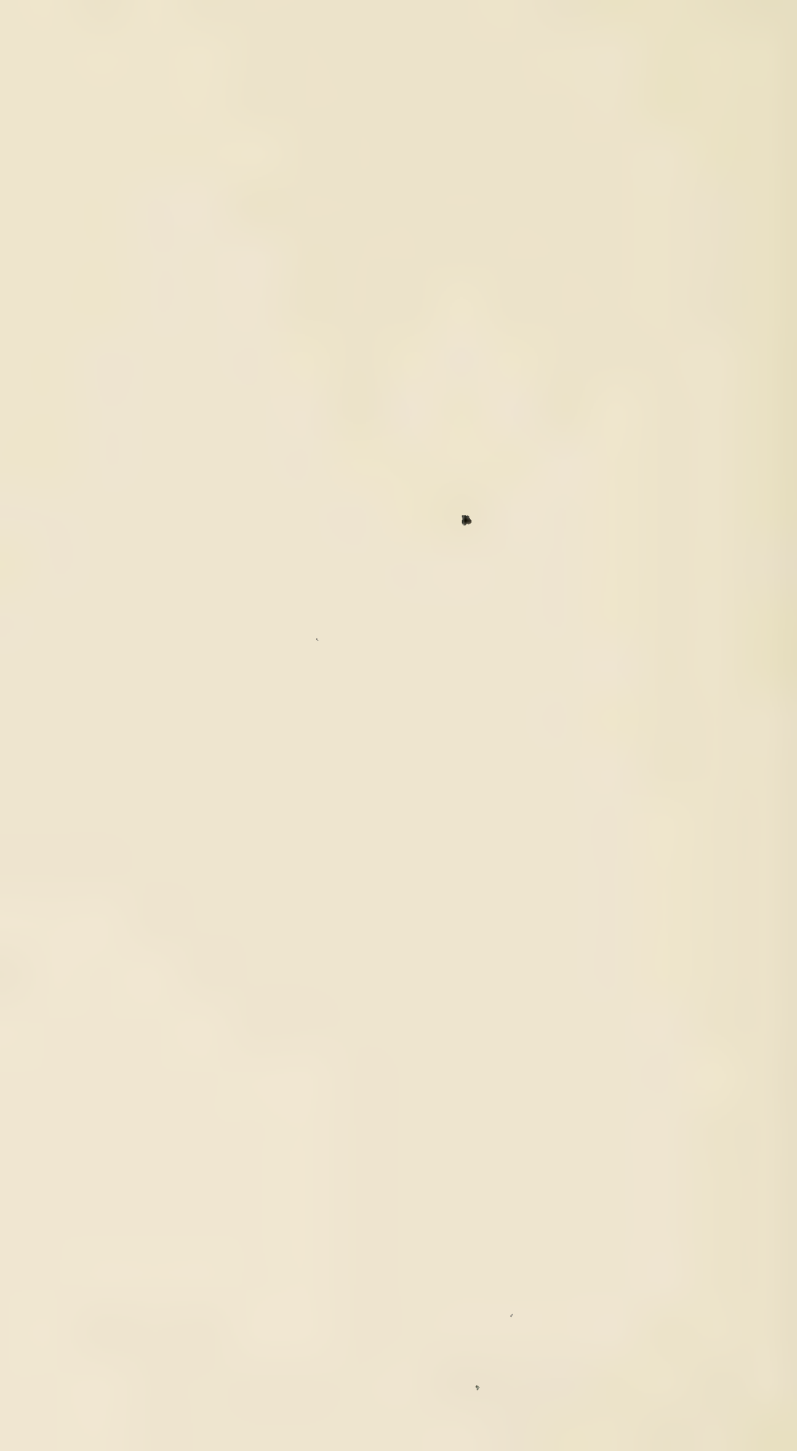
Grocers 220	Skyners 60	Ironmongers 40
Mercers 200	Salters 20	Haberdashers 80
Drapers 200	Vintners 88	Scriyvenors 20
Fishmongers 180	Taillors 200	Dyers 64
Goldsmiths 100		



Early form of arms of the Skinners' Company.
(Courtesy of the Guildhall Library, City of London).



Early form of arms of the Merchant Taylors' Company.
(Courtesy of the Guildhall Library, City of London).



It is not surprising that among so many powerful traders there should have been a certain amount of jostling for position. In 1226 a number of armed men from the Goldsmiths and Tailors fought a pitched battle and many were killed or wounded. The riot was broken up by the City Sheriffs and thirteen of the ringleaders executed. Undeterred, the two Companies were again locked in mortal combat in 1267. This time the battle lasted for three nights and attracted support from the Parmenters (dealers in broadcloth) and Tawyers (dressers of skins). In 1339 the Skinners could be found disputing precedence with the Fishmongers and the fighting in Walbrook had to be vigorously repressed by Andrew Aubrey, a grocer Mayor. Two Fishmongers were executed for their part in the affray. Disputes over precedence were not always full bloodied riots on the Toxteth scale. Sometimes they were no more than a little local difficulty such as when in 1417 Lord Strong and Sir John Trussell "fell at debate for their wives" in the church of St. Dunstan's in the East. In the ensuing *melée* one Thomas Pedwardyne, a Fishmonger, was slain and several others wounded. The service was suspended, as a result of this unseemly riot, and on the next Sunday Lord Strong was cursed with book, bell and candle and afterwards "openly did penance through London."

With so many quarrels over precedence why should the Skinners and Tailors need preferential treatment in 1484? The Skinners and Tailors were a well-matched but competitive pair, forced by the demands of fashion to pull in harness together. In the Middle Ages people did not shed their fur coats when they entered a house, for houses were cold, draughty places. Narrow unglazed windows let in the wind but little sun, and the only source of heat was the open fire. Consequently clothes were designed principally to keep people warm. Cotes, surcotes, gowns, breeches, doublets, hoods, hats, and even slippers, were all lined with fur. As a Venetian envoy wrote in 1513: "In England it is alway windy, and however warm the weather the natives invariably wear furs."

The English had made a fashion of necessity and Skinners and Tailors into natural partners. Although a Tailor himself might sew the fur linings to the robes, this was also an important occupation of a Skinner, who was often paid for 'casting fur upon the gown'. The Black Prince's Tailor was allowed to hire Skinners as and when he needed them. What grounds for acrimony! When a client complained about the cut of his garment the Tailor could blame the Skinner, or if the furs did not lie properly, the Skinner could blame the Tailor. How galling for a Skinner or a Tailor who had done his work well, to see the finished article ruined by the other craftsman's carelessness.

Rivalry in trade was not, of course, confined to the Skinners' and Tailors' Companies. Skinners had trouble with the Tawyers at the beginning of the fourteenth century. Tawing was the process by which the raw animal skins were cleaned and dressed ready for making up into furs. The Skinners owned the skins and the Tawyers carried out work on them at agreed piece work rates. But the Tawyers were craftsmen of some independence, with illusions of prospering on their own. From 1300 onwards they were constantly trying to raise their prices and to break away from their dependence on the Skinners by selling their own skins. The Skinners on their part were determined to maintain their monopoly. A body was appointed to arbitrate between the two crafts, which consisting as it did of three Skinners and one Tawyer was hardly objective. In 1347, during the Mayoralty of Thomas Legge, a Skinner, further ordinances were drawn up which included agreement over payments. In 1365 the Tawyers made a second attempt to stand up to the Skinners and were even prepared to go to prison rather than be done down. However the weight of the City establishment was too strong for them and their case was settled in the Skinners favour by another set of ordinances. It was no coincidence that in both these years the Mayor happened to be a Skinner.

It was no doubt very irritating for the Skinners that they could not deal with the Tailors in the same way as the Tawyers. The Tailors were slower to develop as merchants than the Skinners. No Tailors appear in the subsidy roll of 1319 which gives Drapers, Mercers, Grocers, Fishmongers, Skinners and Goldsmiths as the richest citizens. When the Company received its Charter from Edward III in 1327, they were Tailors and Linen Armourers, engaged in 'making, cutting and working of men's apparel.' The Linen Armourers were the men who made the articles of linen and other materials worn under armour, such as gambesons. These were padded tunics worn under the armour or even, in the case of foot soldiers, with no armour at all, since the gambeson was tough enough to resist any ordinary sword cut. Tailors also sold cloth. From the selling of cloth the Tailors must have begun buying and selling general merchandise, for the sixth Charter, which they received in 1502, bestows on the Company the title of Merchant before that of Tailor by reason of their "buying and selling of all and every wares and merchandizes whatsoever"; it also confirmed their monopoly in "the working, cutting or making of men's apparel within the city and suburbs."

By 1331 the Tailors Company had its own Hall, with a great gate towards Cornhill including a solar above, and another great gate facing into Bread Street. As the years went on more buildings began to cluster around the Hall, until by 1440 Tailors Hall was the largest and most luxurious in the City. Even the Mayor borrowed it for his feast every other year.



A Skinners' Workroom, A.D. 1568
(From a woodcut in the *Germanisches National Museum* Nuremberg).



Liverymen - From Leathersellers' James I Charter 1604.
(Courtesy R. A. Cadman).

The Skinners Copped Hall, purchased way back in Henry III's reign was quite modest by comparison. It lay between Dowgate Hill and the stream of the Walbrook on whose banks it stood. Little more is known about the Hall except that it had five shops with chambers above and the entrance to the Hall in the rear. The only other property the Skinners Company owned prior to 1484 was some land in St. Mary Aldermary, Bread Street and Wood Street. The Tailors on the other hand had messuages in Bishopsgate, tenements on the corner of Poultry, Tower Street and Thames Street, some more property in the parish of St. John Walbrook and St. Mary Fenchurch. They also had seven almshouses, built round a square courtyard next door to the Hall.

If material possessions are the yard stick, then the Tailors would appear to have been the richer Company by the middle of the fifteenth century. But property is a notoriously fickle investment, especially when buildings were made of wood and there were no insurance companies to reimburse the landlord when his tenement burnt to the ground. Real wealth was in the hands of individuals, their skill in trading, their ability to buy on credit and sell with profit like Chaucer's merchant:—

*“ He was expert at dabbling in exchanges,
This estimable Merchant so had set
His wits to work, none knew he was in debt,
He was so stately in negotiation,
Loan, bargain and commercial obligation.”*

London was ruled by merchants, for it was from this class that the Mayor, Sheriffs and Court of Aldermen were drawn. From the time of Edward II the Aldermen were elected from the free citizens of London, in other words from the members of the Guilds. The Aldermen almost without exception came from the Merchant Companies. A study of the lists of names, and the Guilds they came from, tells an interesting tale. For it is the Companies with the greatest number of Aldermen who appear at the top of the lists in subsidy rolls and in the order in which they appeared in public for royal entries and musters of the watch. The list varies little from century to century, but if a comparison is made between the 14th, 15th, and 16th centuries it is possible to trace the rise of Guilds like the Tailors.

14th century	15th century	16th century
Mercers 45	Mercers 41	Mercers 42
Grocers 45	Drapers 33	Grocers 40
Fishmongers 40	Grocers 31	Drapers 28
Drapers 33	Goldsmiths 16	Haberdashers 27
Goldsmiths 23	Fishmongers 13	Merchant Taylors 25
Skinners 17	Skinners 13	Clothworkers 16
Vintners 14	Tailors 9	Goldsmiths 15
Woolmongers 14	Ironmongers 7	Skinners 14
Corders 4	Vintners 3	Ironmongers 14
Ironmongers 3	Salters 3	Salters 12
	Haberdashers 3	Fishmongers 11
		Vintners 5

If the total number of Aldermen for each of these three centuries are added together, and the Companies then listed according to the total number of Aldermen they possessed, the result is the Great Twelve in the present order of precedence:—

1. Mercers 128	5. Goldsmiths 54	9. Salters 15
2. Grocers 116	6. Skinners 44	10. Ironmongers 24
3. Drapers 94	7. Tailors 34	11. Vintners 22
4. Fishmongers 64	8. Haberdashers 30	12. Clothworkers 16

This does not, alas, provide a simple solution to the mystique of precedence, since the Salters are the exception which spoils the pattern. What it does show is how very important Aldermen were to the political influence and power of a Guild. It was when the Tailors became more politically active that their quarrel with the Skinners developed to a dangerous degree. The Skinners had always been more politically powerful than the Tailors. In the fourteenth century the Skinners had two Mayors, Thomas Legge who was Mayor in 1347 and 1354, and Adam of Bury who was Mayor three times, in 1364, 1365, and 1373. In the fifteenth century there were four Skinner Mayors.

The Tailors did not even have an Alderman before 1435. Perhaps such an achievement went to their heads, for in 1442 the Tailors went so far as to set aside the election of Robert Clopton, a Draper, in favour of Ralph Holland, the Tailor who had been elected for Bread Street in 1435. The outgoing Mayor would not tolerate such unseemly behaviour. The rioters were committed to Newgate.

Clopton became Mayor in spite of the Tailors and to teach them a lesson impeached the legality of their Charter of Henry VI. The Charter was confirmed again by Edward IV in 1465, and Clopton's act does not seem seriously to have affected the Tailors, for several more Aldermen were elected from their Company: – J. Derby in 1444, R. Colwyche in 1474, R. Nailer in 1482, J. Swan in 1483, and J. Percyvale in 1484. Percyvale, like Holland, was very eager to become Mayor, but had to wait a long time to realise his ambitions. "The bench considering his hot appetite which he had yearly to that office, disappointed him." Sir John Percyvale eventually succeeded in being elected Mayor in 1498.

The Tailors therefore by the mid-fifteenth century were upwardly mobile, and what better way to prove that they had arrived than to upstage the Skinners in public. The Skinners had no intention of yielding to their rivals in trade. A few squabbles over precedence, if confined to individuals, would not have been too serious. Nothing that bell, book, and candle – or a good cursing or two – could not have remedied. But the trouble was that there were quite a few occasions in the year when the Guilds paraded in the full civic might of their liveries, craft banners, and armour. If two such groups were to start jostling each other for the right to go first then bloodshed would be the inevitable consequence.



Corporate Seal of the Merchant Tailors' Company.



Drawing of a Lord Mayor in Procession in the City of London.
(Courtesy of The Corporation of London Prints and Drawings Room)

Procession and pageantry were an essential part of medieval life, providing entertainment for the citizens and publicity for the Guilds. There were many excuses for street celebrations. Royal entries and coronations, which happened infrequently; religious festivals which were legion and catholic; the Marching Watch and the Mayor's riding to Westminster which took place once a year. It was the occasion of the Mayor's procession to Westminster in 1483, which provoked the fatal confrontation between the Skinners and the Tailors and finally brought them both before Mayor Billesdon in the Guildhall.

When King John granted the citizens of London the right to elect their own Mayor, he made it a condition that the Mayor must present himself for approval either to the King or to his justices sitting at the palace of Westminster, and it is from this decree that the Lord Mayor's procession originates. It was not until about 1500 that the title Lord was added to that of Mayor. "Lord Mayor" is still a title which is enjoyed by virtue of long usage and it has never been confirmed by royal grant. At first the Mayor rode to Westminster on horseback accompanied by the Beadle of his Company, his brother Aldermen, the Guilds, and various City functionaries. With them rode some minstrels to entertain them on the way. The Sheriffs were also accompanied by minstrels, but there was no pageantry in connection with these ridings until the sixteenth century. In 1422, according to the records of the Brewer's Company, William Walderne was chosen Mayor on St. Edmund's Day, "when it was ordered that the aldermen and crafts should go to Westminster with him to take his charge, in barges, without minstrels."

What is certain is that both the Skinners and the Tailors had to submit their dispute to the arbitration of the Mayor and Aldermen on 10th April, 1484. Poor Mayor Billesdon, how was he to choose between these two warring Companies with an equal claim to greatness? He was a Haberdasher with no private interest in supporting the one rather than the other, so impartiality ruled out favouritism. Since there were no hard and fast rules governing precedence he could not fall back on the regulations; since both Companies had received their Charters in the same year, 1327, he could not even award precedence to the oldest; to give them joint status would only have increased their competitiveness. Somehow he hit on the brilliant idea of letting them take it in turns year and year about.

Little is known about Robert Billesdon except that he was one of the wealthiest Haberdashers, who died in 1492 worth several thousand pounds. The son of Alexander Billesdon of Queniborough, Robert became Alderman for Bread Street in 1471 and served the ward until his death. He was knighted in 1485 and elected Mayor in October 1483. Compared to many other Lord Mayors he was neither very wicked nor very good; he did not get involved with national politics, although it was a time of great political upheaval; nor did he attempt to rig elections by bringing armed men into the Guildhall; he was not a great reformer, nor a spectacular philanthropist; yet by this one imaginative solution to an apparently insoluble dilemma his name is being remembered 500 years later.

Opposite

Detail from 'Aqua Triumphalis' by Theodore Stoop – August 23rd 1662.
(*Courtesy of The Royal Maritime Museum – London*).

... of London,
... River of Thames,

Le Feu de la St. Martin

... de Sept



Murder of the City of London and to his right wor...
... Aldermen and Sheriffs of the same...

1483: An: primo R: 3
Robert Billesdon
Shardaffer Mayor
Emyed in St Austins
Walling Street



Arms of Mayor Billesdon as entered in the Records of Mayors and Sheriffs. A.D. 1483.
(Courtesy of the Corporation of London Records Office).

The Billesdon Award is an example of one of those historical quirks when a small stitch in the huge tapestry of time, by reason of its irregularity stands out on its own. The peculiarity of the Skinners and Merchant Taylors, alone of all the Livery Companies, constantly changing places year after year all down the centuries, is something completely irrelevant to the main stream of history yet it is sufficiently remarkable to have coined an idiom all its own – ‘all at sixes and sevens.’

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the idiom as “originally denoting the hazard of one’s whole fortune, or carelessness as to the consequences of one’s actions, and in later use the creation or existence of, or neglect to remove, confusion, disorder, or disagreement.” The first use appears in 1374 in Chaucer’s *Troilus and Cressida*: “Lat nat this wreched wo thyn herte gnawe, But manly set the world on sexe and seuene.” The OED believes the phrase to be based on the language of dicing, probably a fanciful alteration of ‘to set on cinque and sice’, these being the two higher numbers. The later use appears in 1535, “Yet had he leuer marre and destroy al, and (as they say) set all at six and seuen” or again in 1596 “Old Laertes . . . caring for all other things else, sets his own estate at sixe and seauen.”

Although Billesdon decreed that the Skinners and Tailors were to take precedence one of the other in alternate years, he did not specify that they were to be alternately sixth and seventh. The reason for this is that although there was an unwritten code of behaviour, the Companies do not appear to have had a fixed numerical order at that time. On 31st January 1516, however, the Court of Aldermen laid down an order of precedence for the forty eight City Companies 'in procession and for other purposes', which allowing for a few amalgamations and disappearances has never been much altered. It may be purely coincidental that the use of the idiom 'sixes and sevens' in its later sense, meaning chaos and confusion, first appeared about 1535, not long after the Skinners and Merchant Tailors were numbered sixth and seventh. But it gives sufficient grounds for an educated guess that the expression 'all at sixes and sevens' was inspired by the turn and turn about taken by the Skinners and Merchant Tailors in the Order of Precedence.

The Skinners did make one last forlorn bid to get in front of the Merchant Tailors again. Thirty seven years after the Billesdon Award, they tried to make out that the judgement only related to the question of precedence in processions and not elsewhere. But a supplementary Award between the two parties in 1521, interpreting the award of Sir Robert Billesdon as applying not only to 'going in processions, but also to riding, going or meeting in and at all other assembles', put paid to their protests.

No other objections were raised and each of the two Companies accepted the position of seventh every other year without rancour. In October 1688 we find the Skinners trying to borrow the Merchant Taylors' ship. They also arranged for the making of new gowns at a cost of 3/6d with ribbons and 2/6d without. Obviously some very special occasion is afoot and it is no surprise to discover that the Lord Mayor that year – Sir Thomas Pilkington – is a Skinner. As the Skinners already had a barge of their own by that time, presumably Sir Thomas wanted another barge to make a special splash in the Lord Mayor's Show. The Merchant Taylors lent their ship for 40s. to be used as one of the Skinners' pageants.

That the Billesdon Award was a masterly solution to a difficult dilemma has been proved by its durability. It has not been abandoned for being too much trouble, nor for being unworkable. The really brilliant touch was the stipulation that the two Companies should dine together, for it is impossible to maintain a long running feud with a man when you are regularly feasting at his table. As Boswell said "a dinner lubricates business." For 500 years the Master and Wardens of the Merchant Taylors', and Skinners' Companies have twice a year dined together at each other's Feast Days. Today as a result of their past quarrels the Skinners and Merchant Taylors have a special relationship bound by friendship, mutual respect, and the annual fulfilment of Robert Billesdon's conditions.

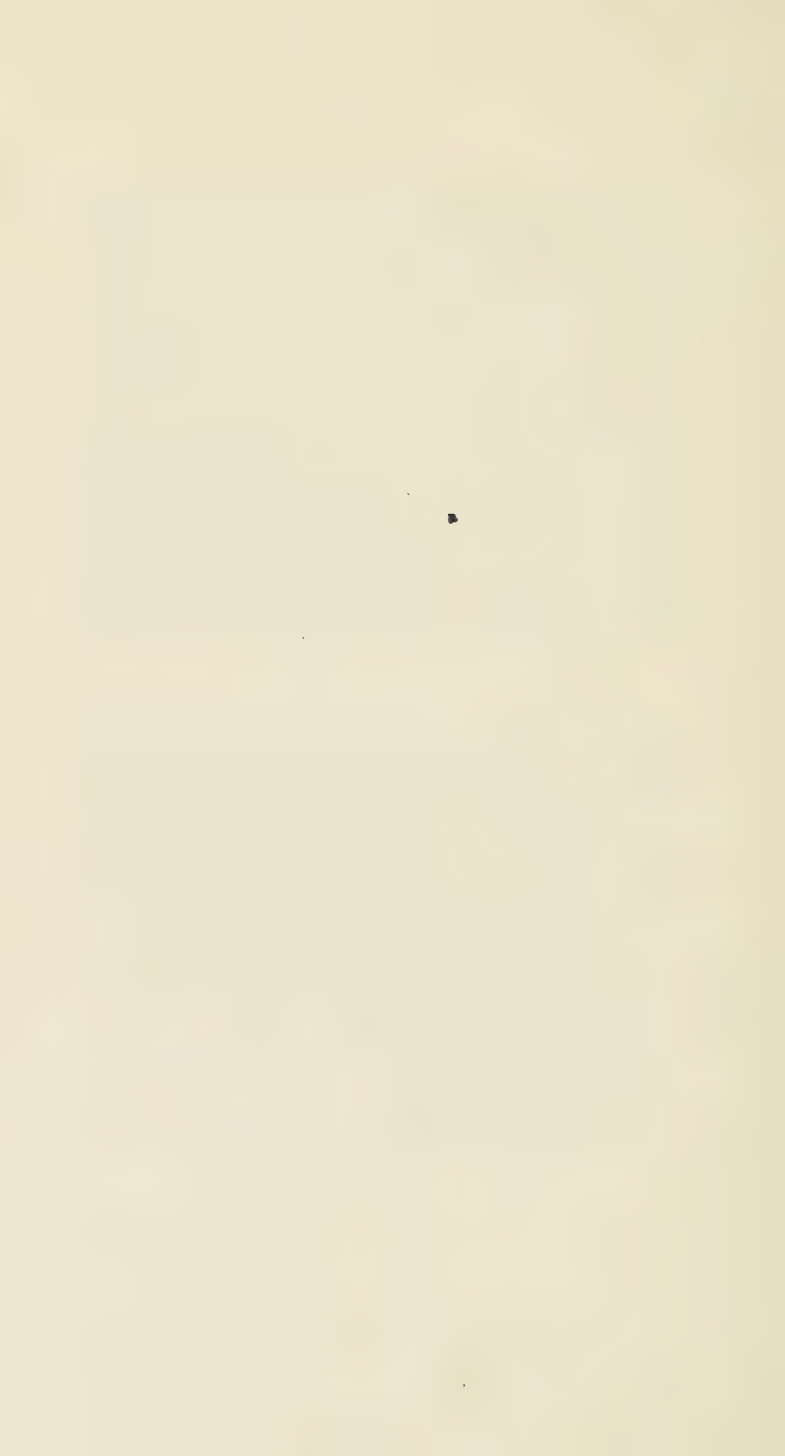
The only ripple on the calm waters of accord is the question of how Billesdon's name should be spelt. Spelling before the age of printing was a haphazard affair, depending to a large degree on the whim of the man who wielded the pen. In the actual Award, Billesdon's name is spelt three different ways – Billesdon, Billesden, and Byllsdon – a common enough occurrence in old manuscripts. But old habits die hard, and even after 500 years neither Company wishes to relinquish its independence, so that wherever the revered name of Mayor Billesdon appears in print the Merchant Taylors spell it Billesden, whereas the Skinners always adhere to Billesdon. ■



Loving cup of the Merchant Taylors' Company A.D. 1680.



Loving cup of the Skinners' Company A.D. 1680.



Anno regni Regis Ricardi terci post co
pellipar & gifford cum gimplibz pbris
Judicio Robti Willelson avarous et
dm matia contido int eos penden.
it Judicium p matia pda pacificand
ed that where there hath been of la
had betwene the aynste wardens and
of London on the one pte. And the a
of the same Ctee on that ope pte. for
in pcessions wim the same Ctee and
ind aynsters wardens and ffelash
Aprill the first yeere of tge flou
oilles have compromitted and sub
and Iutement of Robert Willelson
ee of London. Whereupon the said
abovesaid. takyn uppon theym
mont of and on the pmisses. ffor
ne the aynsters wardens and ff
rote and worshipfull membre
remont of the aynste and ward
admagged, and allowed in the
master and wardens of Stym
aynter and wardens of Taill
hall in the wyll of corpus p
p Stymms than make an oppo
id wardens of taillours so p



KQ-976-278

